

The Next Generations

Former *Seattle Times* columnist and Seattle City Council member Jean Godden takes a peek into our city's future



PREDICTING THE FUTURE is an impossible mission. If you want a barrel of laughs, consider this sampling from *The Official Guidebook of the Seattle World's Fair 1962* describing Seattle 39 years in the future:

"There are intricate transportation systems with jetports, rapid transit monorails and highways over which electrically controlled automobiles ride on air."

"The man of the future will be eager to return home at the end of the day. He will commute to his job in his own gyrocopter, which takes off from his own heliport. Monorail systems shuttle into the city and high-speed air cars travel on electrically controlled highways. There are no traffic jams..."

Well, enough hilarity for one day.

Forty years ago, most Americans assumed Seattle was on the edge of nowhere, maybe a suburb of Siberia. In fact, during the 1964 Anchorage earthquake, an executive editor at the New York-based Hearst Newspapers chain called the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* and ordered the editor to dispatch a reporter to Anchorage—2,400 miles distant—saying, “Oh, hang the expense. Send him by cab.”

In short, Seattle in the 1960s was a

contender that had not yet reached the playoffs. It was before computers, before the Internet, before the cell phone, before gourmet coffee and before Jimi Hendrix's electric guitar—all of which Seattle would later help popularize.

Since then, the city has traveled space years. Starting in the late '60s, Seattle voters elected younger, more diverse leaders to establish a women's commission and an Office for Civil Rights. An African-American served two terms as mayor, and, at one time in the 1990s, the council counted seven women and two men. (That ratio has since been reversed. But Seattle voters have helped elect two women governors, two women senators and women to almost half the state Legislature.) Seattle's obsession with process is infamous, but citizen participation is what has built this city.

Today, the city's population is only half native-born; a majority are youthful, well educated and engaged. Seattle has grown from empty wilderness to a big, influential city in a shorter period of time than any city in the world.

Small wonder that in the past 40 years Seattle has earned a reputation as a national trendsetter. Fads and fashions start here and circle the globe. Can you say Nordstrom? Starbucks? Amazon? Costco? Grunge?

What makes the city such an innovator? Credit goes to that can-do spirit that has prevailed even in difficult economic times. Some years ago, I asked Bud Clark, then mayor of Portland, why Seattle had prospered far more than Portland. Clark had a ready answer: “The 1962 World's Fair.” Like many others, he was convinced the successful World's Fair reinforced Seattleites' belief that their city can do anything.

What does the road ahead look like? Risking some guffaws decades from now, I'll make a couple of predictions.

Seattle, with its location on one of the

sweetest deepwater harbors, will become the leader in world trade. To make this happen, the region will have to improve roads, rapid transit and rail.

Seattle will take an even larger role in preserving and protecting the environment. Seattle's leadership on restoring fish runs, cleaning up pollution and promoting renewable energy will become a brand: Do it the Seattle way.

Seattle neighborhoods, always the city's strength, will prosper and become models for urban living. Neighborhood identification will grow stronger. Ask where a person lives, and he or she will proudly name one of the trendy new addresses: South Park, Rainier Valley, Beacon Hill or Georgetown.

Seattle will finally suffer from the “big one,” the earthquake we've been dreading. However, thanks to strict building codes, damage will be relatively minor, just demolishing such eyesores as the King County Administration Building, the grain terminal and King County Jail sky bridges.

In short, my prediction is for a bright, productive future for the city—provided citizens look at the big picture rather than the expediency of the moment. Take the Alaskan Way Viaduct, a crumbling relic of the 1950s. Some factions argue that a tunnel is too expensive. But how myopic to compound a mistake prompted by the penury of the past. There are priceless waterfront acres that can be reclaimed.

Embarking on such a project revives the Seattle spirit brought to these shores by Seattle's founders. Those youthful adults journeyed from Cherry Grove, Illinois, and possessed a grand vision. They refused to settle for less, even when times were difficult. Schoolchildren today learn about how the railroad picked Tacoma for its terminus. And what did Seattle leaders do? They built their own rail line to the coal mines of Newcastle and later sold the property at a profit.

That should provide an example for citizens and leaders of today. Let's remember the definition of a Seattle optimist: the gal (or guy) who wears a sun visor on her (or his) rain hat. **S**